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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000974

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KJUS](#) [KDEM](#) [ASEC](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: BANGKOK CALM, SOME REDSHIRT LEADERS ARRESTED

REF: A. BANGKOK 953 (AMBASSADOR CALLS ON ABHISIT)  
[1](#)B. OFFICE OF OPINION RESEARCH 4-10-09 ANALYSIS  
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 865 (AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES PROTESTS)  
[1](#)D. 08 BANGKOK 3154 (EX-COP THREATENS CLASH)  
[1](#)E. 07 BANGKOK 3625 (BACKGROUND ON PALLOP)

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reason: 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Bangkok is calm after the April 12-14 confrontations between soldiers and protestors supportive of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD). Some leading UDD figures remain detained by police, while others remain at large. Some Thais predict UDD protests may eventually resume, but it is unclear when, and whether further protests would be violent. Although the UDD's recent actions seemed intended to serve the interests of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, we believe Thaksin's public association with the UDD's recent actions has seriously undermined his ability to advance his agenda. Rumors of King Bhumibol's ill health during this crisis appeared intended to forestall calls for royal intervention, which could have jeopardized the monarchy's prestige. Although the Army seems not to be entirely homogeneous in its political leanings, any divergent loyalties appeared not to impede the Army's willingness or ability to support Abhisit's administration; the crisis also appeared to confirm the Army's leaders have no interest in launching a coup d'etat.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: The restoration of order in Bangkok represents a triumph for PM Abhisit, after the collapse of the Pattaya Summit events made many question whether he could remain in office as Prime Minister. Abhisit's public emphasis on the lack of UDD fatalities (disputed by some UDD supporters) and conciliatory public tone appear intended to prevent his opponents from casting him as a polarizing figure unable to lead Thailand. It remains unclear, however, whether Abhisit's administration will be able to heal Thailand's deep divisions, which have been exacerbated by the uneven distribution, both geographically and on a class basis, of government resources and justice.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment, continued: More than ever, this is a time for the United States to support Thailand. Both the King's Principal Private Secretary and the MFA Permanent Secretary told the Ambassador on April 15 that they greatly appreciated

the Department's condemnation of the violence by UDD supporters. Despite the polarization and uncertainty that have plagued Thailand in recent years, we have maintained a principled stand in support of democracy, the rule of law, and non-violence. We are prepared to work constructively with any Thais willing to adhere to these basic norms, even though they may hold divergent views of the best direction or leadership for their country. Our stance is widely known and appreciated across the political spectrum. End Summary and Comment.

#### NORMALCY RETURNING TO BANGKOK

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14. (SBU) Bangkok remains calm after the April 14 cessation of protests by the anti-government United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) (aka "redshirts"). The state of emergency declared on April 12 for Bangkok and some surrounding provinces remains in effect, but the atmosphere in the city feels normal. A heavy security force presence remains in the area around Government House, though, and a few soldiers in riot gear have also been seen in downtown Bangkok.

15. (C) Despite the humiliating cancellation of the recent Summit events in Pattaya, Prime Minister Abhisit may have favorably impressed many with his government's restoration of order in Bangkok with minimal injuries. In public remarks on April 14, he struck a gracious tone, making it clear he hopes for reconciliation. He now has a fine line to walk; to deter future acts of mayhem, he should be firm with those who broke the law, and yet he should take care not to provide the UDD with martyrs.

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16. (C) In his April 14 call on Abhisit (ref A), the Ambassador pointed out that Abhisit may be vulnerable to charges of a double standard of justice, if his swift action against the UDD contrasts markedly with the relatively lenient attitude the government has shown toward People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leaders, who instigated 2008 protests that occupied both Government House and Bangkok's airports. Abhisit replied that he had no objection to enforcing the law against PAD, but he was hampered by weak evidence collection by investigators in the period prior to his election as Prime Minister. On April 16, however, in a briefing to the diplomatic corps, the PM stated that he had instructed the police to move as quickly as possible in bringing last year's lawbreakers from the PAD to justice.

#### REDSHIRTS' DISPOSITON, METHODS

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17. (SBU) Key UDD leaders Vira Musikapong, Natthawut Saikua, and Weng Tojirakarn remain in police custody after surrendering to authorities. Co-leader Jatuporn Prompan has indicated he will surrender to the authorities in the near future, according to press reports. Jakrapob Penkair, another prominent UDD leader, remains at large. Charges filed against the UDD leaders and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra include holding illegal assemblies, threatening violence, and breaching the peace. The RTG has revoked Thaksin's ordinary Thai passport, based on his posing a threat to Thailand's national security, according to public remarks of an MFA official.

18. (C) The government has not charged military-associated figures currently assisting the UDD, although the UDD likely drew on such figures to plan its street actions, which included the blocking of key intersections, the use of burning buses as barriers, and the positioning of gas tanker trucks with an implicit threat that they could be used as explosive devices. Two such figures who come to mind include retired General Pallop Pinmanee (ref E) and Major General Khattiya Sawasdipol (more commonly known as "Sae Daeng" --

ref D). High-ranking police officials told us privately they had not identified the UDD's military-style strategists; those officials noted that the UDD leaders facing charges were ones who had appeared onstage as public advocates of the UDD's cause, rather than those who likely planned violence from the shadows.

¶9. (C) The UDD did not/not target areas associated with foreign interests or tourism. However, given the extreme actions by the UDD in recent days, we do not rule out the possibility that the UDD could in the future target such areas in order to discredit the Thai government or harm the economy. We have noted public statements by both UDD and pro-government figures that UDD protests may eventually resume, although there is no indication that any such future protests would necessarily be violent. The PM told the diplomatic corps on April 16 that he wanted to maintain the Emergency Decree until he was absolutely certain that order could be maintained. The "worst thing," he said, would be to lift it, only to have to reimpose it in a matter of days.

#### THAKSIN'S OBJECTIVES

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¶10. (C) It remains unclear to us that the UDD can use violence effectively to advance political goals. Although the UDD has advocated a restoration of the 1997 Constitution and denounced the current government as undemocratic, we believe that Thaksin has sought to use the UDD to advance his objectives, many of which are narrow and personal rather than ideological.

¶11. (C) Manida "Micky" Zimmerman (strictly protect), a lawyer working for Thaksin, told us on April 13 that Thaksin had made unsuccessful overtures to Privy Council President Prem Tinsulanonda; part of Thaksin's agenda, she said, included the disposition of his family's frozen assets, amounting to over two billion USD. Manida indicated Thaksin's efforts were rebuffed, and she said the violence in effect showed, "This is what happens if (the royalist/RTG side) doesn't even consider (Thaksin's) offer." Separately, Isra Sunthornvut, Deputy Secretary General to the Prime Minister, told us on

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April 12 that there was little reason for the RTG to try negotiating an end to the standoff with the UDD, because Thaksin's main demand was the release of his family's funds, and this was both legally difficult and a political non-starter.

¶12. (C) We note the Office of Opinion Research's finding (ref B) that the Thai public's faith was recently evenly divided between Prime Minister Abhisit and Thaksin (each polling at 34%). We believe that many open-minded, objective Thais will feel increasingly ill-disposed toward Thaksin, seeing him as having fomented the recent violence without justification. It is unclear, however, whether the strife in Bangkok will lead Thaksin's strongest loyalists -- he has majority support among the poor, per ref B -- to change their view of him rather than simply interpreting recent events in accordance with a paradigm that holds Thaksin as their champion.

¶13. (C) Thaksin has shown that, through the UDD, he has the ability to inflict significant damage on the government. But in establishing this, he appears to have left himself no other option but to destroy out of spite and vengeance. As ref A reports, the RTG now seems less likely to negotiate with Thaksin, much less to make any concessions that could empower him, financially or politically. The revocation of Thaksin's passport and the filing of new, serious charges against him will likely hamper his efforts to return to Thailand as he remains a fugitive abroad.

¶14. (C) If, therefore, the mid-April violence was intended to improve Thaksin's bargaining position, we believe it must be judged a failure. We note, too, that Thaksin recently

indicated privately (ref C) he believed the UDD's protests would prove a historic turning point and could speed his return to Thailand. We believe that Thaksin, who has been outside of Thailand since August, may be making decisions based on poor quality information, much of which may be provided by persons hoping to win financial support from Thaksin.

#### THE PALACE'S POSITION

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¶15. (C) The monarchy's position became difficult during the recent upheaval. In late 2008, Surakiart Sathirathai, a former Foreign Minister with close ties to the Palace, wrote an English language op-ed justifying the lack of royal intervention to end the standoff that had shut Bangkok's airports. Surakiart argued that royal intervention in Thai politics had only taken place -- and would only be appropriate -- in response to widespread loss of life. This argument aimed to deflect implied criticism of the monarchy for allowing the airport standoff to continue as long as it did.

¶16. (C) The most recent violence surely raised fear at the Palace that the UDD's actions would meet the high standard to which Surakiart had referred and make King Bhumibol's intervention seem necessary. (Indeed, as the April crisis developed, a former Senate President, Suchon Chaleekure, publicly initiated a petition appealing for royal intervention.) In his April 14 meeting with Abhisit, the Ambassador asked if Abhisit had requested help from the Palace. Abhisit said he had not, as he did not want to pull the King into the melee. Despite the King's high status in Thailand, we believe he is unable to intervene successfully in the current context. In 1992, the King, who was above the fray, brought contending parties before him and ended a period of strife. Now, however, in many people's minds, the King cannot serve as referee, because he and Thaksin are among the principal players in a contest for power and influence.

¶17. (C) In 2008, Palace contacts and others privately expressed serious concern to us that the King would suffer a drastic loss of prestige were he to try unsuccessfully to restore calm. We were not surprised, therefore, when we heard rumors days ago -- traceable to Privy Councilor Palakorn Suwanrath -- that the King had fallen ill. We believe those rumors were meant to justify Palace non-intervention while avoiding an appearance of abdication of royal responsibility for Thailand's well-being. (Not only

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did Abhisit tell the Ambassador that the King was in good health -- ref A -- but an Australian diplomat also told us the King was well, according to a doctor who had seen the King on April 13.)

#### THE ARMY

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¶18. (C) During the strife, rumors spread of a possible military coup d'etat. Isra Sunthornvut, Deputy Secretary General to the Prime Minister, admitted to us that the Prime Minister did not have the full support of the Army, but Isra estimated approximately 90 percent of soldiers backed the PM, with the other 10 percent being allied either with Thaksin or with retired General Pallop Pinmanee. As the Army dispersed UDD protestors, we saw no indication of less than full support for the administration.

¶19. (C) The Army had appeared in 2008 to receive pressure from some quarters to launch a coup against the pro-Thaksin administration. The Army leaders' refusal to do so indicated that they did not want to seize power, and we have no basis to believe that has changed. As noted in ref A, the personal dynamics between Abhisit and Army Commander Anupong were

encouraging.

¶20. (C) Even leading UDD figure Jakrapob told us the Army had comported itself well during the crisis. Speaking with us by phone as the UDD rally was disbanding on April 14, Jakrapob said soldiers surrounding the UDD gathering at Government House had exercised restraint and acted in a proper, disciplined manner. Jakrapob worried, however, that soldiers would allow an organized mob of civilians to attack the UDD gathering; this possibility, rather than any direct threat from the Army, could explain UDD co-leader Vira's public claim that the demonstration had to end on April 14, for the sake of the UDD supporters' safety. (Comment: Over the past year, there have been numerous confrontations between groups of redshirts and the PAD, with both sides at times being armed. There also have been reports that some soldiers and policemen have at times donned civilian clothes and joined the PAD and UDD, respectively. We have no confirmation that a mob was poised to attack the UDD on April 14, but it is not implausible that some people in positions of authority would seek to deploy a mob toward that end. End Comment.)  
JOHN